

RESEARCH ARTICLE	Academic and social motivators for public and private school choice: a case study of a small town	
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Abstract		
The main street of Midcoast is dotted with small storefronts and large old colonial houses. The speed limit is only 25mph, and one of the local cops is generally hanging out on a street corner, waiting to ticket anyone who might roll through the cross walks. Large SUVs and station wagons fill the parking spots, and on Sunday the streets are packed with traffic from the three churches in the few blocks. Where the main street branches down the hill, the campus of Midcoast Academy sits to the right. This private school has existed for over a hundred years, and the extensive campus stretches back behind the imposing front brick building. A mile up the coast on Rt. 1, past large homes with views of the ocean, the driveway for the recently renovated public high school is on the left. This modern looking building is brand new and surrounded by well-kept athletic fields that are frequented with children playing soccer and lacrosse. Mothers wait in idling cars for practices to end and chat about their children's busy schedules and upcoming school events.		
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Introduction

I chose this town as a case study to evaluate public and private schools. I was interested in the factors that drove the choice between these two options for parents. I wanted to understand some of the complex dynamics of choice in a population of parents who highly valued education. The privatization of education is a hotly debated topic in the United States, as is school choice. These issues are generally discussed in the context of the class or racial divides that exist between those who have the resources to demand better, and those families who settle for the educational option available to them. However,

Midcoast provides an interesting case study because of the population demographic. Most Midcoast families have the economic resources to afford private school. Religion is not a dividing factor, and both the public and private school are centrally located so transportation is not an issue. A study in Midcoast can ignore these reasons that traditionally dominate school choice and examine some of the ideological and social issues that guide the decision. Academics, teachers, athletics, college, and peer groups are a few of the concerns most parents have regarding their children's school experience. Parents in Midcoast are informed and integrated into

their children's education, and academic learning is a clear priority. However, I discovered that satisfaction with a school or a parent's desire to choose a new learning environment is governed by many forces outside of the classroom. The question of school choice takes on new meaning in a small town because of the intricate social networks and the importance of inclusion in the community.

Literature review

Many diverse factors are involved in evaluating parent choice, and accumulating a common body of literature on the topic is a challenge. Several explanations and structures are brought together to evaluate the situation in Midcoast. First, parents' value of academic success and the importance of learning cannot be ignored. It is also necessary to evaluate why this population of middle and upper class parents might have different expectations than other lower class groups, and how increased economic support in a community changes the nature of school choice for families there. For individual families, school choice is mediated by many factors from peer groups to student motivation. Finally, it is impossible to discuss schooling in Midcoast without examining the effect of a small town and tight social network on parents' interactions with each other and the local schools.

The relationship of a school and its community can be studied on many levels, and the demographics of the community are a huge influence on the interactions that take place. There is a great deal of research regarding schools that struggle because they deal with limited resources and community problems, but much less information regarding affluent communities or successful schools. It is often easier to analyze problems than it is to explain successes, and it is hard to generalize most research about public schools in the United States to include schools that have a large economic base and successful student body. However, the town of Midcoast provides an interesting case to examine the entitlement of upper-class families (Lareau 1987) as well as the various social forces that are navigated when a parent makes the decision to choose between a public and private school.

Annette Lareau (1987) provides the most comprehensive study about how parents in communities like Midcoast interact with their children's schools. She finds that significant cultural factors related to class strongly influence

how families navigate their interactions with schools, and that parents who are educated and economically stable are much more comfortable making demands or intervening on behalf of their children. Parents expect to engage in an equal partnership with the school and integrate home and school life in order to promote their children's academic success. Parents know each other outside of class and interact both at formal school events and outside the classroom. She finds that this level of involvement can increase to the point where it is unhelpful, due to parents being over-demanding of teachers or feeling that they can override a school's decisions. However, parents are generally informed and active and schools are responsive partners to promote high academic achievement. The parents Lareau describes tend to be the ones who seek out the best educational options for their children, which direct many toward private schools.

Goldring and Shapira (1993) look at school choice in the context of social class, identifying deciding factors for middle and upper class parents. While they do not isolate any of the factors that motivate parents' decisions to choose, they conclude that satisfaction is connected to the socio-economic status of parents. Higher SES parents are highly educated and are increasingly satisfied with the school they choose because of the empowerment they feel. When they feel that they are partners in the decision-making and the school is in compliance with their interests, parents are the happiest with their children's educational experience at that school. Goldring and Shapira (1993) join parent satisfaction with school choice. Parents are not driven to exercise their right to choose unless they are dissatisfied with their status quo. When their partnership in the school fails, parents are motivated to look for other options.

Gemello and Osman (1984) try to identify the factors that push parents to demand private school, but the findings of their study also assume an inherent difference in public and private schools. This study reaffirms the limited applicability of many educational studies to the Midcoast community. The authors find that private school attendance is directly related to economic limitations, and that higher incomes directly correlate with higher attendance at private high schools. They also find that as public school funding improves, private school attendance decreases. A private school is selected when the family prefers more resources than are available at the public

school or when the income level of the family creates a higher “taste” for education. The small size and homogeneity of income levels in the Midcoast community makes this difference in “taste” impossible, because most parents are professionals and well-educated themselves. The private school is also not a choice only because of the resources it offers due to the fact that Midcoast High School is able to offer a similar education to Midcoast Academy. No parents claimed that MHS was a bad school or that the public experience in the town was significantly inferior to the private option. While Gemello and Osman’s findings can easily be generalized to school districts with under funded public schools, which unfortunately is a larger segment of the American education districts, the unique nature and funding of the Midcoast community requires a different framework to explain the decisions to send a child to public or private schools.

So, in the rare community where public school funding is high, how do we explain the demand for private education? Coleman and Hoffer (1987) offer a structure of social capital that helps understand the exclusionary forces of a community that could push a family to a private school. The authors claim that students need social connections with their peers, their families, and their communities in order to be successful in a school. Within this framework, private schools are designed to specifically meet these social needs in order to help these social connections be established. In Midcoast, many of these needs are also met in the public school, but the relationship between schools, families, and communities that Coleman and Hoffer explore points us toward the non-academic factors that parents value when selecting schools regardless of the type.

Some sociologists believe that public and private schools represent inherently different philosophies of education. J.B. Rotter’s classic theory of “locus of control” provides an interesting framework to examine key differences in public and private school families. This theory generally applies to students themselves, but also offers another way to explain parents’ expectations of schools. Rotter’s model separates the kinds of forces that dictate behavior into internal and external categories. Internal control means that an individual feels that he or she has direct control over an outcome; in schools students would feel like it was their own task to work hard and take initiative to get better grades. External control means that other things determine the outcome, so a

student would place the blame on teachers, environment, or any factor outside of his or her individual self. Bartel (1971) discusses the “locus of control” of students of different classes, finding that middle-class students were more self-aware and proactive about their role in school than their lower-class counterparts. Wigfield, Eccles, and Rodriguez (1998) look at student motivation in a broader sense; examining the many factors such as peers and school environment. They believe that the categories internal and external are too basic to fully understand the many complex motivating factors.

Outside of families and individual relationships, the small size of the town of Midcoast is a defining factor in school choice. Schmuck and Schmuck (1990) look at the performance of a school through the eyes of the community in which it is located, specifically focusing on high schools in small towns. Their population is more rural and less affluent than the one examined in this study, but the role of the high school in the town dynamic is very similar. The authors discuss the level of democratic participation in small town high schools, finding that despite the high levels of social integration, there is an absence of collaboration and actual participation in the schools. Midcoast would be seen as a success in their model because the school has the resources to promote the kind of integration they suggest and avoids the problems they find in many small towns. Despite these differences the Schmuck study highlights the importance of the public high school in the social and community life of a small town, acting as a physical and symbolic gathering point for members of a community.

Salganik and Karweit (1982) reinforce this value of community in a school, although they believe that public schools struggle because of a lack of community support. They claim that parents will not support schools until there is a general ideology of education that is demonstrated, and claim that public schools in the United States lack this common philosophy. Their structure ignores the ability of small towns to have common ideals that are exemplified in public schools, and the support of the public school in Midcoast disproves their claims. However, their findings do highlight the importance of community support and social acceptance of a school. These studies provide frameworks to uncover, separate, and examine the many factors that parents consider when choosing public or private schools.

Methods:

I conducted my study in Midcoast, a small coastal town in New England. Midcoast is a town of about 8,500 residents in the most populated county of the state, about a half hour drive from a metropolitan area. This location gives Midcoast the community feel of a small town, but means that the residents are generally commuters to the city. Midcoast attracts a very affluent population, and the average income and price of property has been steadily increasing. In the years from 1990-2000, the population grew about 6%. Some residents are concerned because the average age of the population (currently at 41.6) has also been rising due to the number of affluent retirees who are moving into the community and purchasing property. However, this has not yet negatively affected the number of children in schools or the economy of the town. The average family income in 1999 was \$73,234, and three-quarters of property is single-family owned homes averaging \$242,250 (Appendix A).

Education is valued highly in the community and it is supported through the large tax contributions from residents to the schools. Midcoast residents have a strong educational background:

94.6% of adults graduated from high school while 57.3% held Bachelors Degrees or higher. Midcoast schools have consistently been ranked near the top in the state for both utilized resources and student performance. The per pupil cost in 2000 was \$7,280, almost \$2,000 above the state average. There are four public schools in the town, one elementary school that serves grades K-1, another elementary school that serves grades 2-4, a middle school for grades 5-8, and a high school for grades 9-12. In 2003, a \$20.5 million building renovation program was completed in all the schools, which built a new middle school and renovated the remaining buildings. Not only do the schools have the physical space to provide an excellent learning environment, but the high school also boasts only a .83% drop-out rate and a 90% college matriculation rate. There is an expectation of excellence and the resources to promote success in the public schools.

I selected Midcoast for my study because it also has an excellent private school that offers instruction in grades 6-12. Midcoast Academy is located in the heart of downtown and has been there since 1814. 300 students are enrolled at MA and roughly 30% receive need-based

financial aid to offset the \$17,280 yearly tuition. All students are day students and come from 43 communities in the state, some commuting over an hour to be there. Despite this geographic diversity, 54 students and 45 families at MA live in the town of Midcoast. This 18% is a significant portion of the population. There is a 25-acre campus with academic and athletic buildings, and the school recently started construction on a new science center. MA offers a similar curriculum to MHS, although the classes are smaller and there is an individualized student advising system. There is also an intense focus on college applications, and generally every MA graduate goes to college. All students at the school are required to play a sport and participate in at least one artistic activity; so all students are active in extra-curriculars. This is not hugely different from the public high school, which without a requirement still has 80% of its students involved in after-school activities. There is some difference in these activities offered; MA is known for a strong hockey program while MHS has a better track team. Athletics can be a minor influence in the decision process, but equal opportunities are provided at each school in most extra-curricular activities.

These similarities between the schools led me to the community of Midcoast because I believed that I could look at the decision between public and private schools without having the basic factor of superior education be an influence. The schools have different teaching philosophies, but the private school does not produce more students with high test scores or better college admittance rates. Midcoast Academy is known for teaching a traditional curriculum with standard subjects and pedagogical styles. MHS has been much more exploratory with the curriculum, offering team teaching and an integrated curriculum. Some of these projects have been successful and have been permanently implemented; others have been eliminated after a year or two. These philosophies of teaching offer a contrast to each other but do not set one school as clearly better option for learning. Parents feel that one style might be better suited for their individual child, but there is not a majority sentiment in the community that one school is better. This balance allowed me to ask questions about the other individual and social factors that influence parents' decisions.

I interviewed twelve parents for this study. Eight of the interviews I conducted with one parent in a family,

one I conducted with both parents together, and two I conducted with each parent from the same family separately. I spoke with members of ten different families, but conducted eleven separate interviews. Four families had children in the public school, four had children in the private school, and two had children in each. I traveled to the homes of each family for six of the interviews and then did the remaining five over the phone due to travel restraints. Most of the interviews lasted about an hour in length and I recorded the sessions by hand and on tape. I found my first three families through a friend who had attended MA himself. He put me in touch with these contacts and then I used the snowball method to make connections with other families in the community. All of my interviews were conducted in a two-month period.

All of the families I interviewed were two-parent homes with at least one child who was enrolled in or had gone through the Midcoast school system. While I never asked about income levels, the appearance and location of each home and the occupation of the parents led me to assume that all families ranged from comfortably middle-class to very well off. All parents who worked held professional level positions. A few of the families enrolled in MA mentioned receiving some level of financial aid, but no family ever cited economic limitations as a reason for not exploring a private school option for their child. All the families were white, but in 2004 the town population was 98.5% white. While my survey population is homogeneous, I believe it is an accurate representation of the total racial composition of the town.

Findings:

"You want to know about my kids' educations and how we picked schools? Well, have you got all day?"

-Mrs. Lawson, mother MHS and MA students.

The decision to choose between a public and private school is one that is mediated by many factors. Each child has individual needs, different schools offers specific resources, and every community shapes a family's experience in the school system. In talking to parents, there were hundreds of circumstances that motivated their choice, but as my interviews progressed I began to see a distinctive organization of these reasons. Individual needs and social forces mediate the choice between public and private schools in a small homogeneous community where religion and economic limitations are not

factors. Scholars such as Annette Lareau (1987) have pointed to the level of individualization that middle and upper class parents demand for their children, and Midcoast is no exception. Parents in this socioeconomic class are integrated in their children's educations and demand specialized attention and resources from their school. If these needs are not being met, the parents will explore options to place their child in an alternative learning environment.

Social networks are also important in the small, tight-knit communities of small towns. The residents of Midcoast were all extremely sensitive to feelings of social network and acceptance, whether they were referencing their child's peer group or the connection they felt with other parents and residents. Social interactions for children and parents both focus on the schools, and families need to feel included in social groups, in decision-making processes, and in the educational process a child undergoes. The public schools, especially the high school, also serve as a unifying physical and social space for residents of a small town. Through sports, activities, and opportunities for parent involvement, high schools help residents feel a sense of identity with their town. When any of these connections are not established, families are driven to look elsewhere. The private school in Midcoast caters to this need by repeatedly emphasizing the importance of various levels of community to its students and their families.

I found that community connections for families have many dimensions, ranging from the peer networks between children to the integration of a family in the town social scene. These relationships might seem disconnected from school choice, but all revolve around the school community in Midcoast and are central to parents' choice between the public and private school. At the most basic level, the importance of students being socially included in the peer group of their school is extremely important to parents when they evaluate their happiness with their child's educational experience. If a child does not make friends or has problems with other students that are not resolved, some parents will simply find a new school environment for the student to alleviate the social pressures and start over. Parents also value the types of friends their children have and have expectations for the level and type of peer pressure their child experiences. Not only do parents want their children to have friends who are kind and morally conscious, but

they want them to be around other children who have appropriate goals and aspirations. Families at the public and private school had very different ideas about the role of a child's peer group, and the source of a child's motivation differed in the two school communities. Public and private school parents had very different ideas about what influences would best motivate their child. Parents at each school had different expectations for who should push their child and how involved they should be in their child's academic education.

The relationship between the parent and the school is also an extremely important one, and all parents expected a high level of access. All stated that they needed to feel included in the decision making process at the school and spoke of the importance of accessibility and responsiveness on the part of teachers and the administration. Finally, parents used the school community to connect with the larger community. Parents stated that they needed to feel included in the school community and parent social network through volunteering or attending school events. Several who had older children out of school felt that they were no longer a part of the town community and their personal social circles had shrunk because they were no longer connected to the school system.

These categories encompass the most important dimensions of connection and inclusion that parents need in a school community in a small town like Midcoast. Despite my separation of these levels of community, they are all closely interconnected. When a relationship failed at one level, for example if a child was having a hard time making friends at school, relationships at other levels would suffer as well. The child's parents might have problems with a teacher because of it, or interpersonal relationships between families would be strained. Because of the close level of integration in a town of this size, inclusion is important and social networks are far reaching. Any level of conflict in the community can lead to social isolation. When this breakdown of community occurs, parents look to remove their children and themselves from the environment that is no longer inclusive and in Midcoast, most turn to the local private school, which works particularly hard to market a strong school community. Most families were willing to give public education a chance, and it was clear that poor academic opportunities were not the reason that most parents left the public schools in Midcoast. Parents who left did so because a relationship broke down, either with their

child's social group, with the goals or individuals at the school itself, or with the town in general. Parents were satisfied with a school not only when their child was academically successful, but also when their family was socially included into the educational experience on all levels.

Individualized attention: "my kid was getting lost there"

The parents at both MHS and MA have the expectations and individual focus that is standard for a population in this socio-economic class. Parents at both schools demand a high level of instruction and attention for their children, and parents who do not feel that their children's needs are being met look for alternate schooling options. Parents expect that education is individualized to their child's specific needs and that the necessary attention is directed to a child to specialize curriculum for him or her. Because MHS has extensive resources, the school's ability to cater to these expectations is far above most other public schools, and it can retain many families who value this individualization of education. The residents of Midcoast fit the profile Lareau (1987) creates of involved and demanding upper-middle class parents. Parents who are educated and economically stable are very comfortable promoting their values and engaging themselves for the sake of their children. This level of integration leads parents to demand that the school focus attention and meet the specific needs of their child.

Parents at both the public and private school in Midcoast have these expectations for their children's education. Parents who were unsatisfied with MHS frequently used the phrase "my kid was getting lost there." Five hundred students for four grades is hardly a large school, but the 300 student population of MA over seven grades creates smaller classes. This size is better suited to students who were quiet or less aggressive about participating. Mrs. Adams has two boys at MA, but kept her youngest daughter in the public school. Mrs. Adams sent her second son to MA because "he was an introvert... in a small setting he felt exposed and was made to participate and was drawn out in a way." This attention is coupled with an involved advising network at MA, in which a faculty member frequently checks on a student and reports his or her progress and mental health to the parents. The parents at MA and MHS both valued small class sizes and the attention from teachers in school, but some parents felt that only MA could create this environment for their child. Coleman and Hoffer

explain these expectations; although they generalize that such attention can only be found in private schools (1987). The authors explain that private schools are smaller and allow for more intensive relationships between students and teachers because students spend more of their time with a smaller number of faculty. In Midcoast, the private school does fit Coleman and Hoffer's definition, but the public school offered a structure that satisfied many parents' expectations as well.

The public school did accomplish the same individualization and close relationship building as the private school for many families. I found that parents who were happy at MHS talked about the same type of environment and individualization that parents at MA vocalized. In both groups felt that their child was in an environment where they were receiving a large enough amount of attention, so the system at MHS did not fail everyone. Mrs. Pelham, a mother of four students in the public system told me that "our kids have all been able to get into all the courses they wanted and the classes are small." Public and private school parents did not have different expectations for individualization, but they differed on how they felt their individual child's needs were being met in the public school.

Some parents who felt that MHS was not small enough had children who had specific needs that needed to be dealt with. All parents felt that their child was unique—some were outgoing, others shy or easily distracted. However, there were students for whom the small, structured environment of MA was better suited because of disabilities or diagnosed social disorders. Two families had children in high school with ADHD, one of whom knew before getting to MA and the other diagnosed while there. These parents felt that their children were better served by the attention at MA than they would have been at MHS. Some parents of children who were particularly bright had similar feelings about the two schools, complaining that MHS catered only to the middle and did not offer enough support for children with higher academic performance. Mrs. Franklin, a mother with two sons in private school in the Midcoast area, explained that "the public school really caters to a midline, if not lower, so when you have kids on either end of the spectrum I think their needs tend not to be addressed as much." MHS failed to provide the specialized attention that some parents felt their children needed. Mr. Sawyer, a member of the school board and

father of a son at MHS, explained that these concerns are impossible to fix due to the nature of public education. Because all students have to be accepted, the range of abilities and needs that must be addressed is very large and resources must be distributed equally across all levels of performance.

Individualized attention for their children is important to parents in Midcoast, as is expected given the nature of the population. There was no difference in the general educational ideology of parents in the public or private schools; instead they were separated by their perception of the resources at each school. Physical differences of class sizes or structural aspects such as the advising system separated the two schools, which otherwise offered very similar academic opportunities. The individual needs of children varied from family to family, and the education and feelings of entitlement of parents in Midcoast encouraged them to take a very active role in exploring school options for their children. Parents in Midcoast all expected individualized programs for their children, and some felt that this was provided at the public school, while others felt it necessary to enroll their children in an environment where personal attention was a priority. The personality and needs of their individual children strongly influenced this decision.

Personalized aspects of school choice varied from family to family, and so I looked for larger social structures that might also influence parents to pick between MHS and MA in this community. Another mediating factor was the level of community and social integration that students and parents experienced in the public high school. Once again all the parents were willing to give the public schools a chance but at the point where a social relationship broke down they looked for a replacement. MA not only provided an individualized academic environment, but also an alternate community dynamic and social group. The individual needs of their children are at the forefront of all parents' minds, but community integration is also deciding factor in a small town like Midcoast.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND PEER GROUPS: "NICE KIDS AND NERDS" Children's own happiness was a strong determining factor of parents' contentment, and no study of parent choice can ignore the feelings of the children themselves. Social inclusion is especially important to adolescents, and their focus in school is gen-

erally much more social than academic. This was evident from the importance of social stress in middle school that repeatedly arose in the interviews. Every one of the parents I spoke with recalled problems from their child's middle school years. None of these problems were academic; there is no change in the curriculum that challenges students in a new way. Instead, middle school is a difficult social environment with new pressures and intense social stratification. For example, Mrs. Davis is a mother of twin daughters and transferred her girls to Midcoast Academy just before sixth grade in an effort to fix a negative social experience.

"We volunteered to coach basketball and Molly was having a hard time making friends. The woman who was helping me explained to me, 'oh, Molly's tall, she's thin, she's pretty, she's athletic, she's smart, they hate her'. And she just said it so matter of fact, like this is why they don't want your daughter here. So socially we found the public schools to be pretty much a nightmare."

If a child does not fit in socially with his or her classmates, most parents seemed to feel that trying to promote academic success would be useless. For the Davis family, moving their daughters to a new social environment allowed the girls a chance to start over when they felt that integration was a lost cause. The Jacksons moved both their son Chris and their daughter Jenny to MA, and both children had social problems that influenced their decision to switch schools. Mrs. Jackson told me, "Jenny wasn't that happy socially in the in the public school by the time she got to middle school." This exclusion encouraged the family to explore private school options, which only exacerbated the social situation for their daughter. She was socially ostracized even more for wanting to leave, and "the kids were pretty nasty to her. You know middle school."

Parents felt that these social problems were generally alleviated at Midcoast Academy. MA promotes its small size to parents and students and claims that it is too socially intimate to have cliques. With only 30 students in each graduating class, all students know each other well. When the Jackson family moved their son Chris to Midcoast Academy to follow his sister, one of the positive benefits of the school for Chris was this lack of social hierarchy. Mrs. Jackson explained that,

"For the boys there is really only one social group. There's not a huge caste between the jocks and the non-

jocks or something, because athletics are required and everyone participates in sports on some level."

Other parents were not quite as supportive of this idea of social integration, despite the school size. Mrs. Davis ended up removing her other daughter from MA after her junior year in high school because she still felt that she did not fit in with her peers. This experience shows that no school can offer a perfect social environment, especially in the middle school years, but private schools in this setting can exist to offer a change and a chance for many students who are not socially integrated to start over.

Midcoast Academy allows this fresh start because it creates a social structure that encourages integration. Coleman and Hoffer (1987) point out that private schools can have problems with social integration because their students are not all from the same external community. Midcoast Academy forces students to play sports and participate in extra-curricular activities; a strategy that these authors claim is a method to encourage integration. Activities outside the classroom create groups or teams, which serve as structured social communities for students who lack informal social peer groups. Mrs. Lawson had moved to the community from New York and her four children were enrolled in both public and private schools. She explained how her children became socially integrated, and pointed to extra-curricular activities as a very influential agent. "Because my kids moved her from New York, they had to learn to make new friends. Sports teams help, especially when kids are from all over."

All parents recognized the importance of a child's social experience and the struggles each one faced in middle school, but parents who left their children in the public school either had children with fewer problems or believed that they would outgrow it. The Pelham family sent four children through the public school system in Midcoast, and the youngest daughter dealt with social drama in her middle school years. In the end, her mother was happy with how her social experience turned out despite the imperfections that she seemed to feel were a standard part of an adolescent experience.

"They're all very nice girls, very supportive of each other, not competitive among themselves, but there's a lot of drama. Not picking on each other like in eighth grade, they have resolved those differences with each other.

It's very tiring, but not catty because the school is small enough and they've outgrown that."

Public school parents generally had more patience that their child's social problems would shift and he or she would be included in a peer group again. All parents were concerned that their children were socially integrated into the school community. When the situation appeared unfixable, private school provided an alternative social group for a child to start over.

Parents were also concerned about their children's peer groups, but for different reasons. These social networks that students develop with their peers can be the most influential motivators to promote or discourage behavior. Students want to be included in a peer group, but parents want to make sure that the pressure coming from this group is a positive influence on their child. Parents in Midcoast were surprisingly unconcerned with drugs, alcohol, or sexual activity. Instead, many spoke extensively about the role of peer groups in promoting motivation and academic excellence. When a child was not as self-motivated as he or she might be, the parents had very different views on who needed to provide the incentive for a child to work harder and how this encouragement should take place.

The importance of peer group was repeatedly stressed among the private school parents, who also felt that the school should be the primary actor to encourage hard work. The higher expectations at Midcoast Academy put pressure on all students to achieve, which parents felt influenced peer pressure to promote academic achievement. When MA parents spoke about the deficiencies of the public high school academics, they rarely claimed that there were not enough opportunities. Instead, they felt that MA was a more "academic setting" with "higher expectations." These families felt that it was the job of the school to not only provide resources, but to demand that students challenge themselves and make use of the opportunities given to them.

Private school parents felt that this focus also created a certain social group that was more motivating for their children. Because there was a high expectation for behavior, all students made an effort to live up to that. This creates different values in high school social groups, who will then place a much higher value on performing well academically. Many parents at MA felt that their children's performance in public school had not

been as good as it could have been because they had been limited by the expectations of a social group that did not value academics. Ms. Adams, a divorced mother with three children sent her two older sons to MA. She moved Andrew, the eldest, so that he would be surrounded by students who would have goals that she found more appropriate.

"Being a male and an athlete in the public system, he was really getting feedback that that was what he was about and a lack of nurturing for his intellectual, academic self... MA provided a better peer group for Andrew to maximize his potential as a student and an athlete."

She felt that Andrew's school and his peer group were better motivating influences than their family might be. Mr. Jackson, Chris and Jenny's father, summed it up when he explained that, "you didn't feel like a nerd if you were working hard." He felt that his children had not performed up to their potential in public school, where they were afraid of being teased for being smart. The students at MA had different goals and valued academic excellence as an indicator of popularity.

Public school parents recognized the value of peer groups, but were more concerned that their children's friends were "good kids" rather than smart or motivated ones. Mrs. Sawyer has three children, two of whom were currently enrolled in MHS and a third who is almost old enough to enter. I asked her about her son's friends and she explained that "he has a huge group of freshman boys who hang out together, all nice kids... some struggle with certain things, but they're doing their work, going to school, not getting arrested, not getting caught drinking, smoking, or doing drugs too much." Her daughter's friends included a group of junior boys "who are pretty interesting...just goofy, nice kids." Public school parents seemed to be more in touch with the social happiness of their children without being concerned with the academic success of their peer groups.

The parent-school relationship: "doing a lot outside the school"

The difference in the role of a peer group on a child's motivation is rooted in one of the critical differences between public and private school parents. All parents, even those with children at MA, felt that any child who was intrinsically motivated could succeed at MHS. Each child has a very different approach to learn-

ing and schoolwork, and all need different levels of structure. For those students who were not able to push themselves to succeed in their classes, parents at each school disagreed on who should step in. Parents at MA wanted to the school to intervene and influence the children to value academics above everything else. Mrs. Lawson, a mother of four children who all went back and forth between MA and MHS, differentiated the academic environments of each: “MA, academically, pushes the kids a bit more and provides more structure than MHS. I think there are great teachers at both, but I feel that the framework is more important.” Expectations came from the school, and students’ performances were a product of what the school demanded.

Parents looked to the school to reinforce the goals they had for their children, although they differed in how great a role they expected the school to take in motivating students’ performances. These different expectations support the primary finding of Goldring and Shapira that states “the extent to which the parents perceive the school’s program to be compatible with their expectations of the school has the strongest influence on parents’ sense of satisfaction” (1993, 406). When parents were picking a school for their child to attend, they wanted an institution that would communicate a mission and value structure in line with their expectations.

Parents in the two schools differed in their expectations for the children themselves, so the schools were expected to play different roles to encourage performance. All of the families described their children as very bright, and all went on to college. However, if a child was struggling because she or he was not working up to potential, parents at MA immediately looked to the school to provide a better environment to promote success. Not all public school parents shared this belief that any child could excel if placed in the right structure, and a few parents at MHS conceded that their children might not be the smartest ones in the class. Mrs. Sawyer, a mother of three children at MHS, has a husband on the school committee and is a huge supporter of the school. However, she told me in the same sentence that her son was “not bright, actually pretty average” and that “the school is pretty content with anyone not causing a lot of trouble or flunking out.” No parent at MA ever suggested that a child might be struggling because he or she was not intellectually capable of handling the work.

Parents valued the same educational outcomes for their children, but they had different expectations for the learning process. Rotter’s concept of locus of control (1966) can be expanded to apply to parents instead of students, explaining the internal or external control differences in Midcoast families. Most MHS parents value internal control and feel that it is the job of the individual parent to control academic outcomes for children. MA parents rely on external control and place the responsibility in the hands of the school. This model does not explain differences in student attitudes or in school responses, but does provide an accurate framework to understand the difference in public and private school parent expectations in Midcoast.

Midcoast Academy parents wanted the school to create a new community where expectations were higher and pressure was put on everyone. Mrs. Franklin is a mother of two sons, both of whom she enrolled in private school after a terrible public experience in a different community. She explained to me that for her, the crucial difference between public and private schools for her was the school’s role in promoting academic excellence.

“At MA, it’s not just that you’re in seventh grade and here’s the curriculum so that’s what you’re going to do. They expect more, they demand more, and they raise the level of expectation so kids have to meet it.”

Midcoast Academy parents felt that their children were capable of excelling in school if the right structure was provided for them and if the school demanded a high level of performance from all students.

Parents at the public school felt that the family should be the most active source of motivation for a child. It was not the role of the school to demand that a child perform at a certain level, it was the parents job to monitor that the child was doing what was asked of him or her. MHS does have high expectations for their students, and have a large number who excel in the classroom. Mrs. Pelham’s son was one of those students, and she explained that his success was due to teachers, conferencing, and the school environment provided to him. However, when I asked about the source of her son’s motivation, she first explained to me that she and her husband have law degrees and because she is able to stay home with her children, “obviously there is encouragement at home.” Her son was given the resources in public school to succeed, but she considered it her job,

along with his father, to promote achievement.

All parents in both schools were highly involved in their children's education, public and private school parents felt differently about their active role in the process. These differences in sources of student motivation are in conflict with Lareau's generalizations about parent involvement (1987). She finds that the level at which parents push their children compared to the expectations set by the school vary based on socio-economic status, and all middle and upper-class parents were engaged in their child's learning both through involvement in the classroom and supplemental work at home. Parents at MA seemed reluctant to provide this extra assistance, and expected the school to do its job fully so that the education of their children could be taken out of their hands. They were very involved as volunteers in the school and had high expectations for the results of their children's academic work, but their involvement did not seem to include lots of outside academic time with their children. This could be due to a time constraint from their job, but seemed to be a more of a philosophical difference. Public school parents viewed the family as a motivating influence, while private school parents left this task up to the school. One mother in the public school had hired a Spanish tutor from a nearby college for her son, and another was quizzing her daughter for a science test when I called to conduct the interview. If an MA parent sensed that their child needed extra help, it was the job of the school to supply it.

The dissimilar college search processes of students at MHS and MA reinforce the differences highlighted by the locus of control model. Parents demonstrated a huge difference in their willingness to engage in the application process. All parents expected similar outcomes, but MHS parents internally controlled the situation, while MA parents left the control to outside forces. MA provides an extensive college guidance process that starts freshman year and provides personal counseling to each student at the school. Mr. Johnson has two sons who have already graduated from MA and two more who will, so he was an expert on the college search process. He explained to me that "the head guidance counselor is unbelievable, and all the kids do their applications early and she reviews each one to make sure they dotted all the I's and crossed all the T's." Public school parents were generally disappointed with the help the school provided, but did not demand that the guidance counselors

do more. Instead, parents took on the responsibility themselves. Mrs. Sanders has two sons who went to college after graduating from MHS, and she told me that when it can time for her oldest son to apply, "whatever charge there was [of the application process] I would have to say that I did most of it." Mrs. Sawyer reinforced this approach and explained that with her daughter who is a junior, "we've been doing a lot outside [of the school]."

Coleman and Hoffer (1987) would explain these differences as a lack of social capital in private school families. Midcoast families possess human capital, which is measured in parent education and values for their children. Social capital exists when these parents create meaningful bonds and directly impart this human capital on their children. The authors explain that many well-educated parents do not have the time to impart meaningful social capital on their children. The difference between MA and MHS parents is not related to time constraints. The two groups had different views of how active parents needed to be in promoting learning in the home. Parents valued the need and effectiveness of social capital differently.

Parents who stayed at the public school were much more willing to fill in the holes that they perceived in their children's education, whether it be a motivating influence or the college application process. Private school parents expected the school to fill these roles. These differences show that parents have contrasting expectations for the relationship they build with the school. Their satisfaction with their choice was rooted in how well the school's environment and philosophy matched their own. Parents chose a school based on this alignment with their expectations.

The parent school-relationship: "we went right to the principal"

All parents had clear expectations for their role in the family-school relationship. Parents had different perspectives on how much they would be involved to educate their child, but all agreed that they expected the school to be accessible and receptive to them. Not all parents perceived themselves as equal players in their relationship with the school. Parents at both schools actively approached the teachers and administration about problems, despite having very different views about their role in carrying out the solution. Every parent at both schools

said they felt comfortable contacting the school with problems and had done so at some point in their child's educational experience. The level at which parents got involved varied greatly, but there was no connection between how often parents contacted the school regarding their child and what type of school they sent their child to. However, inclusion in this relationship was extremely important for most parents. The relationship between the parents and the school was expected to be a partnership, even for public school parents who took more individual responsibility for their children's education. Parents wanted to feel like a part of all decision-making processes and needed to be assured that the school was listening and responsive to their needs. When a school upheld their end of the responsibility, parents offered time and volunteer support.

Goldring and Shapira find that "parent involvement and empowerment are two possible ways in which parents express their sense of ownership and commitment to their school" (1993, 398). If this connection does not happen, parents will look elsewhere for a school that offers this relationship. In Midcoast, once again parents are willing to try to build this relationship in the public school until something happens to make them feel alienated or ignored. Some families felt that this breakdown was due to structural problems in MHS, but in listening to individual stories it seemed more that specific problems had not been addressed as a parent would have liked. Because the school could not solve every academic or social conflict in favor of the child or parents, the breakdown of this relationship is sometimes inevitable. Parents who feel most strongly about these feelings will seek a new environment in which they feel they can build a partnership with the school.

The schools understand the importance of this relationship and the communication that fosters it. MHS and MA both attempt, to varying degrees, to facilitate this connection with parents. Parents do not contact the schools about their own children only because they feel it is important, but also because this behavior is actively encouraged by both MHS and MA. MHS gives parents the home phone and email address of their children's teachers, and MA furthers this openness by having teachers call home to give frequent progress reports. Mrs. Pelham told me that she was extremely comfortable going to MHS about her children, "but that's my nature. I think all parents are encouraged to do that... they encour-

age you to contact them when there is an issue and parents really feel that they can do that." She felt that the structure for parent feedback and the reception of the public school to her needs was sufficient. Other parents disagreed.

The parents who moved their children to MA all experienced a clear breakdown in this parent-school partnership. It cannot be determined whether the school was not responsive or the parent's claim was not substantiated; regardless, when parents felt that they were not in an equal and open dialogue they searched for somewhere that allowed them more access. The Jackson family had the most serious instance of a failure in this relationship. They moved their daughter to MA after a disastrous middle school teacher-parent conference.

"Jenny is pretty shy, we felt like she got lost. We literally went to a teacher conference in November and she started talking about Jenny and she was talking about another kid. It was her homeroom teacher talking to us about someone else's child."

It was clear to the Jacksons that the public school system was not putting in the effort they expected in regard to their daughter's education. Mrs. Davis had a similar experience when she called the public school about a gun threat her daughters had overheard and was dismissed by the administration. "I never got a single reply back from anyone. I even sent [a letter] to the Department of Education and never got a response."

The administration at each school plays a key role in this parent-school relationship, and all parents knew a great deal about their principal. Both MHS and MA have administrators who are well liked and supported by the community and both schools place the burden of maintaining a school community in the hands of this individual. Mrs. Pelham is a veteran of MHS and has had one of her four children at the school through the last two principals. She raved about each and the sense of community both brought.

"She [the first principal] was in at 5am and knew every kid by name. And at her speech at graduation she went through the entire class and mentioned every graduating senior and something about them.... Recently he [the new principal] announced he's leaving and all the girls started crying, just to give you an idea of the relationship he has with them. He comes to every game, every perfor-

mance. It's wonderful having a small school, and we've been very lucky."

Mr. Sawyer, a father of three children who is also on the school board, pointed to the strength of the administration in the Midcoast public schools as an explanation for the district's excellent performance. "We're lucky enough to have experienced principals, and because Midcoast is considered well-performing and a high-paying district, we can attract well qualified individuals." He also pointed to the superintendents as key individuals who monitor the many people below them and maintain a standard principals are organized and receptive about parents' individual concerns while also attentive to the needs of the school and Midcoast community.

The role of the headmaster at MA is slightly different because of the nature of the school community. Instead of being part of a larger district, MA exists as an isolated entity and the headmaster is in charge of dictating the spirit and procedures for the school. A veteran of MA, Mr. Johnson has sent three children through the school with a fourth about to enroll. He pointed to the recent switch in headmasters as the only negative aspect of MA. A new administrator recently came in and tried to change how things were done, to the dismay of long-time families.

"The headmaster before was very strong, very good communicator, very good vision for where he wanted the school to go, met with parents often, very accessible and visible. And while the new headmaster; while he was visible and somewhat accessible, he didn't always listen to what people were saying about how some of his actions he was taking would be changing the environment of the school."

Mr. Johnson recognized the power of the administrator in not only dealing with procedural problems but also in influencing the nature of the school community, and strongly valued this latter responsibility.

It is interesting that the most important figure to most of the parents I talked to was the administrator of the school, given that individual teachers are the ones who spend the most time with their children. Parents at both schools recognized that the quality of teachers could be erratic and that no one was guaranteed a solid succession of quality instructors. The quality of teaching seemed to not be a factor in the choice between public and private schools, as long as the parents felt that the

administration was on their side and accessible to hear their complaints. In the public school, Mrs. Pelham told about a conflict she had with her daughter's language teacher.

"In the case of this one teacher some of us had a problem with... we went right to the principal and he sent the assistant principal in to monitor the classes and see what's going on. The school was extremely responsive."

These priorities of parents in both schools prove that it is not the quality of teaching that satisfies the parents as much as the administrators' ability to handle and resolve complaints. The quality of instruction was valued below the leadership of an administrator, suggesting that for all parents the community of the school was more important than the academic learning in the classroom.

This idea was more strongly reinforced at MA, where I found more discontent about the quality of teaching than at MHS. Mrs. Davis felt that because teachers at MA were not required to have their teaching certificate, many were experts in their subject but unable to deal emotionally with adolescents' developmental needs. Other parents complained of high turnover due to the lower salaries offered by the school. Mr. Johnson justified these salaries by explaining that because teachers taught for less than in the public school, they were at MA for reasons other than money and more engaged with the school. "They prefer to be in that small environment where they can get close to the kids, watch them develop, and really be creative." These comments all point to the importance of community over academic learning. Individual teaching abilities were rarely mentioned, but the values of the school community were frequently highlighted. The climate of the school and the community that is fostered by the administrators was seen as far more important than the classroom instruction that took place. Parents seek alternatives when this relationship between the parent and the school breaks down in the public school. Midcoast Academy offers an environment in which accessibility and community are highly stressed to rebuild this partnership for those who lost it in the public school.

Community inclusion: "you're leaving us"

The public and private school options in Midcoast are clearly differentiated by the social networks and relationship to the community that parents experience. Other

factors have focused on the differences in the ideology and structure of each school; none have examined the inherent divide between publicly funded education and privatized options. The level of parent-to-parent networking and community integration that is maintained at MHS is directly connected to the fact that the school is public. Public schools are maintained through local taxes, and in small towns like Midcoast, the high school is a central icon in the town social life. Basketball games are town events, the high school booster clubs are the largest fundraising booths at the summer fair, and the building is used for a variety of events. A general connection to the community is maintained through an allegiance and integration into the public schools.

Patricia and Richard Schmuck highlight the role of a high school in a small town in their study on democratic participation in such environments. Schmuck and Schmuck find that “people go to the school for education, entertainment, social life, and community identity” (1990, 14). While most of the schools in this study are much more rural than Midcoast High School, the community is still brought together with an identity around the high school in a way that an urban school would not be. The schools supplement and structure local culture for students and their families. Mrs. McDonald, the mother of one son who graduated from MHS, explained that most activities in the town, even the large summer festival that draws people from all over the state, focus around the high school. “The crazy event of the summer, the festival, is tied to the school and groups like the basketball boosters. That definitely, because of the big focus which is mainly through the high school, makes us more of a community.” Midcoast is not an area isolated by geographical distance, so people do not attach themselves to the high school because of a need for resources. Residents look to the school to create a community identity and supplement social life.

Parents whose children had already graduated remembered feeling like more active members of the town of Midcoast when their children were enrolled in school, primarily because they had more social interaction with other parents. The familiarity of people in the small town fueled parent involvement. Mrs. McDonald explained to me that despite the small size of the town, “now that I don’t have anyone in the school I feel less connected to the community.” This reinforces the importance of the school’s role in the social atmosphere

in Midcoast. Parents have personal relationships with the school because they are concerned with their children’s individual education, but parents also have a social relationship with the school to establish their place in the social network of the community.

All parents I spoke with commented on their level of involvement and volunteering in the schools, and even those who felt that they could have given more time were engaged at some level. Mrs. Sanders, a mother of two sons who went through the Midcoast public school system, told me both that “I don’t think I have been enormously involved” but then mentioned that she “just got home last night from working at the Jazz Festival because I was president of the parent support group for the drama program.” This shows that the expectation for parent involvement is very high, and parents in Midcoast feel the pressure to give their time to help with school activities. This is not a negative pressure; most parents felt that their volunteer time was a natural expansion of the time they would have given to their children’s activities. Mr. Sawyer explained, “the community is emotionally attached to the school... activities bring people together even if they don’t have kids on the team or in the play.” School-based gatherings provide a chance for people to support their own children as well as the community as a whole.

Parent involvement is not rooted only in academics or the environment at the school; parents are also concerned with creating a community for the town. For example, parents emphasized sports because this was the method through which members of the community were brought together as spectators and fans. Mrs. Sawyer highlighted these priorities by explaining, “there’s a lot of sports emphasis which is maybe not so great—a lot of nurturing around that and the booster parent association. Parents will do almost anything for their kids, and while I think that’s true academically as well it’s not that visible.”

Not only were parents involved through sports, but also through drama, the arts, or the PTA at the school. These parents were the same ones who spoke about being active on the board at the library, coaching travel soccer teams, going to church, and getting their kids involved in community service outside of the school.

Coleman and Hoffer’s model of social capital (1987)

helps explain the importance of community inclusion to local families. On a basic level, the small size of the town promotes a close social community, only because many people know each other and the social circle is tight-knit. Coleman and Hoffer's social capital legitimizes these social connections and illustrates the importance of such a community network on schools. Social capital in a family is the connection between parents and children. Social capital in a community is a connection between members of a town. These relationships allow information to be shared and provide support for education. MHS parents were highly integrated into this network. Without social capital in a community, a family will look to a school to provide an alternate social network. Parents at Midcoast Academy find this in private school.

The one common factor among all private school families that differentiated them from the public school population was the fact that despite living in a small town, none felt like a part of the Midcoast community. Private school parents felt ostracized from the Midcoast town community most acutely, and this isolation was a factor that drove many to explore options outside the public school. The Jacksons are an excellent example of this situation. At the time of the interview they had been living in Midcoast for over fifteen years. Despite this, Mr. Jackson explained that because they were young parents and in a different economic position when they first arrived than other children's parents, they failed to be integrated into the community. Even after their children went through school, he said that "we are not a large part of the social scene here; our social life revolves around family or work." While this was not the most dominant reason they sent their children to private school, there was no connection to the community that encouraged them to stay in the public system. The Jacksons, and other parents like them, achieved a level of community integration at Midcoast Academy that made up for their disconnect from the town. Mrs. Adams explained, "mandatory athletics really put me on the sideline a few hours a week year round, and that was of value. It just gives you time to talk to people... you're all together for however many minutes and I think a sense of community really grows from that." MA parents found a community in the school to replace the social network they felt separated from in Midcoast. Midcoast High School parents had either raised their children in the community or immediately been welcomed and inte-

grated into Midcoast when they first arrived. They all felt that they were active members of the town, especially while their children were attending the schools.

A family's feelings of community integration were not dependent on the length of they had spent in Midcoast but instead on their process of integration and the welcome they received. This immediate social inclusion greatly dictated whether they stayed in the public schools or not. Several families were disconnected from the Midcoast town community shortly after arriving and they sought a more welcoming environment at MA. Parents who were already strongly integrated into the community claimed that Midcoast was a welcoming town, but many new families told stories of being ostracized when they tried to break into the social network. The Davis family felt this strongly after their arrival, and the girls struggled on a club soccer team that they felt was biased against newcomers. Mrs. Davis recalled,

"One mother said to me, now, she was mad that her son didn't make the Lions, which is the Midcoast travel soccer team, 'Can you believe it? Justin made the team and his family just moved to town!' I was thinking, how long to we have to pay our taxes and live here before our kids get any respect?"

Mrs. Davis felt that to other mothers in the community, there was a sense that her family had to spend a certain amount of time in the town before they could be accepted as members. Without this level of inclusion, they could not enjoy benefits such as belonging to a team. Others mothers told stories of being rejected by Girl Scout troops or play groups because they had not lived in town long enough.

Mrs. Pelham, a mother at MHS disagreed and told me that "it is not hard at all to move into the community." She then explained that integration happened through involvement in the churches and at the school. She explained that, "A family finds their place and starts integrating themselves." If this "place" is not found or accepted, a family does not seamlessly fall into their role in the community. This process suggests a high level of assimilation and homogeneity. To Mrs. Pelham, the idea that a family might not immediately join one of the five churches was inconceivable. She explained that "the Universalist is very open" and that seemed to be where families who might not be perfectly mainstream were expected to go. I do not think that Mrs. Pelham's views

on religious integration can be generalized to the entire Midcoast population, but there is a clear sense of socialization that must occur in order for newcomers to be integrated.

Most families had moved into the community and gone through this process of community integration. About half had done so after they had children. None of the parents at either school had grown up in Midcoast themselves. When I asked about why they had moved into the town, every family who moved cited the reputation of the public schools and community as one strong reason for picking Midcoast over other small towns in the area, and all of them had given the public schools a chance. The reputation of the schools, established both through their consistent high performance and word-of-mouth, was extremely important to all residents. Mrs. Sawyer explained that above everything else, “we moved to Midcoast based on what we had heard about the quality of the public school system.” The fact that this much value is placed on the feelings of other residents reaffirms the strength of the Midcoast community, and the value that is held for opinions of others in the social network. Mrs. Sanders moved to Midcoast with her family just before her children entered middle school, and the educational system was the Sanders’ primary reason for choosing the town. Reputation had been extremely important to her family, and not only was academic success valued, but “it was not just a [academic] school issue, we were looking for a community and a community school.” Academics can be measured numerically, but the Sanders were more concerned with the aspects of the school that are spread through reputation and social connections rather than what they could learn on a piece of paper.

This is contrary to the findings of Salganik and Karweit (1982), who do not recognize the importance of school reputation, especially in a small town where everyone knows each other. The authors claim that private schools are legitimate when they achieve the respect of families, as demonstrated through enrollment. Public schools force students to attend and so they are legitimate institutions only because the government allows them to remain open, regardless of whether parents respect them. Midcoast is a community where public and private school choice is an option for most families, and thus the public school is held to the same standards as the private school and these different structures of legitimacy and

respect do not exist. MHS attracts most of its students, many of whom move in from other towns, because of its repeated high performance and community reputation. Whether a school is public or private, legitimacy does not come only from serving students, but from the reputation the school receives and the kind of students it is able to attract. The nature of school choice in Midcoast shows just how important the reputation of a school is, regardless of whether it is public or private.

The excellent reputation that drew many families to Midcoast did not hold true for every family. When parents had problems with the schools, this reputation proved untrue. This did not encourage a family’s failing community involvement in any way. When a family left the public system, their integration in the community essentially ended. Every family that moved its children to Midcoast Academy eventually felt disconnected from the town as a whole, and the MA community was substituted for the town network. The Franklin family also moved to Midcoast for the reputation of the schools, but immediately placed their son in MA. Mrs. Franklin explained that she was distanced from the town community because of her separation from the public schools. “Maybe if I had been here before... and had some sort of core involvement, it might have been different. But we moved here and our son was at MA and so my social focus revolved around that.” This disconnect was not the factor that drove all families to the private school, but the replacement of the private school community for the town community was an eventual consequence for every MA family.

This separation from the town was due in part to the lack of connection to other parents in the community itself. MA students come from many towns, and no geographic community is supported. The Adams family lived outside of Midcoast, and Mrs. Adams’ perception of the MA community highlighted this idea. “MA is a community but it draws from all over... people travel miles and they really get there which is a function of how much everyone is invested in so many ways.” Many students felt this division most acutely when they separated from their peer groups. Not only were they geographically distant, but many children also experienced social isolation from their public school friends when they went to MA. While these students replaced their peer groups with new ones at the private school, many parents told stories of hostility and exclusion that their children experienced

from their old friends. Both of the Jackson children faced this animosity from their peers.

“Chris had a very hard time leaving his friends at Midcoast and they didn’t make it easy for him. There was a lot of peer pressure and the feeling that he was deserting them... It wasn’t that they were mad that he was going to a private school, it was more like, oh—you’re leaving us.”

Children were as aware of the connection between the school community and attendance at public school as their parents, and the decision to attend MA was seen by many as a betrayal of the community. Once a family chose to move to the private school, their connection to the community continued to breakdown. This process highlights the many levels of relationship built between students, families, schools, and communities and the dimensions of interplay between them.

Conclusion:

“[Changing schools] is a hard decision to make, especially for the kids who come up through the ranks and have a close set of friends. You have to pull them out of that environment, so it’s good to have some set criteria about why you’re making that decision.” –Mr. Johnson

Mr. Johnson’s comment summarizes several key conclusions about school choice in Midcoast. First, the decision to choose between a public and private school is not one that is taken lightly by any family. Parents highly value their children’s development, and selecting the environment for their child to attend school is one of the most important parts in the process of a child’s education. Second, Mr. Johnson points out that while every family has different characteristics, there are set guidelines that govern school choice. The criteria for the Johnson’s probably differed from the factors their neighbors considered, but there are some common themes among all families in this community. One of these commonalities is the importance of the community for families in a small town, as shown by Mr. Johnson’s concern for his children’s social integration and the environment they were immersed.

The decisions of Midcoast parents cannot explain school choices across the country, but studying this community provides a focused look at some of the key influences that motivate families. This study is specific to this site, and the homogeneity of the population isolates the kind

of communities to which we can apply the findings. However, Midcoast provides a chance to closely examine the expectations and actions of parents in higher socioeconomic brackets. Parents who are well educated and financially secure tend to have many demands about their children’s education, and in this study I hoped to better illustrate what those demands are and how they influence parent’s choice of schools.

One of the important lessons from Midcoast concerns the nature of public and private schools in the United States. It is generally the case that public schools cannot offer the same quality of education that private academies do. Private schools perform better than public schools in most parts of the nation, but Midcoast proves that a public school with appropriate resources can offer a competitive education to a local private institution. Well-funded public schools can consistently perform well, and these schools will earn a reputation and be respected. Midcoast shows that parents in higher SES brackets do not inherently prefer private schools, and public education can be as successful as private. It is also important to note that the success that parents measure is not always academic. Schools can have high test scores and send children to good colleges, but Midcoast parents showed that in small communities, parents care about more than classroom learning. We cannot ignore the personalized attention that parents demand for their children, and the level of individual focus each family has is extremely high. However, parents are also concerned with a number of relationships that the family builds with the school and the community.

I. Purpose, Background, Significance:

As debate rages about the problems in the American public school system, increasing value is placed on the private sector of schooling. In my research I am looking to identify motivations behind parents’ decision to send their children to public or private schools and then I would like to speak with the students to correlate these motivations with the child’s actual experience. I am conjecturing that better resources at private schools are not the only factors drawing parents, but there are social networking and mobility factors that suggest private school is a better option.

II. Test Procedures:

I am going to interview six families in one community

who have children attending the public school and six families who have children at the private school. I will conduct an hour-long interview with one or both of the parents, and then interview their child for a half hour. While some of the questions about class and social mobility may be stressful for the participants, there is no serious risk due to their participation. There are also no personal benefits for the participants, but I hope their answers will help bring about better understanding of the role of public and private schools in America's social hierarchy.

III. Subject Population:

I am going to use Midcoast as my test case due to the homogeneity of income levels, race, and family background in that community. It is also ideal due to the nature of the school system. Midcoast Academy is a secular private school that serves only day students. Many parents choose MA over Midcoast High School, despite the fact that MHS recently built a new facility, is known for having some of the highest quality of education in the state, and is free. I hope that in looking at this community I will be able to erase some of the usual motivators behind leaving private schools (better teachers, more resources, etc.) and look at some of the social factors that would then play a role. I am originally from a community in the state about an hour away, and while I am acquaintances with several students at both high schools, none of these families actually live within Midcoast. I am going to use them to refer me to other families who I will be able to interview without any prior knowledge of their educational experience. I do not feel that this minor connection to my community will make me biased; instead I believe the benefits of connection will help me receive more honest and open answers from the families I am referred to.

I am going to interview 12 families, six who decided to stay at MHS and 6 who sent their children to MA. The families I know will refer me to a few other students to begin, and I will use a snowballing technique from there. I am going to ask each family personally to participate and then ask for referrals to other applicable subjects. Due to the homogeneity of my population as a whole, this snowballing technique should offer me a broad enough range of experiences. In speaking with the parents, I will obtain permission to interview their children (who may still be underage). My conversations

with these high school students will focus on their experience at their high school regarding social interactions and their perception of their parents' decision.

IV: Treatment of Data:

I will tape record all of the sessions and keep the identities of the individuals confidential. Should any evidence of illegal activity or other incriminating information come out in the interview, I will erase that portion of the tape as soon as the interview is concluded. The only people who will have access to the information in my interviews will be my advisor and myself. In my report I will use alternate names and exclude any defining characteristics that would make the family or individuals identifiable.

V: Interview Schedule:

1. Why did you choose to send your kids to MA/MHS?
2. Did they want to go there?
3. Has the experience been what you thought it would be?
4. Did your children always attend private/public school? If no, why did you switch?
5. Would you ever consider sending your child to the other high school?
6. Do you feel that in general public or private education is better? Why?
7. Did your children have a positive experience at MA/MHS?
8. What was a negative feature of their education there?
9. What kinds of kids did they end up being friends with?
10. Do they have any friends from different schools?
11. How would you describe a typical family from MA/MHS?
12. Do you feel a part of the community at this school?
13. Do you feel like a part of the community of Midcoast?

14. Are there any significant differences between the members of each of these populations?

15. How do you think your child would be different if they went to the other option of schools right now? How would this affect them down the road?

Added Questions: (1/15/05)

16. How do you think your experience as a parent compares with others at your school?

17. Do you feel that the administration is sensitive and responsive to your needs and the needs of your child?

18. How comfortable are you being aggressive about your child's needs?

19. Do you feel like a part of the community of parents at your school?

20. How is this community fostered/what keeps it from existing?

VI: Research Informed Consent

Public v. Private Choice

Purpose:

I am conducting a research study to examine the factors motivating parents' decisions to send their children to public or private schools and the connection to their children's actual experiences. I hope to uncover assumptions held by the parents' about the social environment at the school and then see if these perceptions are true.

References:

1. Bartel, Nettie R. 1971. "Locus of Control and Achievement in Middle and Lower-Class Children," *Child Development*. Oct, Vol. 42, No. 4: 1099-1107.
2. Coleman, James S. 1987. *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities*. New York: Basic Books Inc.
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4. Goldring, Ellen B. and Rina Shapira. 1993. "Choice, Empowerment, and Involvement: What Satisfies Parents?" *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. Winter, Vol. 15, No. 4: 396-409
5. Lareau, Annette. 1987. "Social Class Differences in Family-School Relationships: The Importance of Cultural Capital," *Sociology of Education*. Apr, Vol. 60, No. 2: 73-85.
6. Rotter, J.B. 1966. "Generalized Expectancies for Internal versus External Control of Reinforcement," *Psychological Monographs*. 80, Whole No. 609.
7. Salganik, Laura Hersch and Nancy Karweit. 1982. "Voluntarism and Governance in Education." *Sociology of Education*. Apr-June, Vol. 55, No 2/3: 152-161.
8. Schmuck, Patricia and Richard. 1990. "Democratic Participation in Small-Town Schools," *Educational Researcher*. Nov, Vol. 19, No. 8: 14-19.

Procedures:

Participation in this study will involve one interview and possible follow-up questions for clarification. I anticipate that your involvement will require an hour.

Risks and Benefits:

Participants in this study may experience some emotional discomfort regarding the nature of the questions, although you are free to decline to answer. Although this study will not benefit you personally, we hope that our results will add to the knowledge about school choice and the public and private systems in the United States.

Confidentiality:

All of your responses will be held in confidence. Only the researchers involved in this study and those responsible for research oversight will have access to the information you provide. Please note, however, that unlike information you provide to your doctor or lawyer, the investigator can be compelled by a court to disclose this information

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to participate, to end participation at any time for any reason, or to refuse to answer any individual question.

9. Wigfield, Allan, Jacquelynne S. Eccles and Daniel Rodriguez. 1998. "The Development of Children's Motivation in School Contexts," *Review of Research in Education*. Vol. 23: 73-118.